

Senators,

I am very glad to testify today on behalf of my son David who is Asperger in the Autism Spectrum and for other families in the spectrum. I am here to say that I avidly support the SB1000 Bill, Autism Services Accessibility Program (ASAP).

I must say tell you that my son was in the public school system for 12 years and that it would take me way too long to cover all those years. However I would like to talk to you about his high school years and give you a perspective on how an older Asperger, a teenager struggles within a school environment. Generally, he is affected by Asperger in two very significant areas. 1) He is greatly affected in his ability to interact socially with other people and 2) He has great difficulty processing and handling complex living skills, or in other words it is difficult for him to organize tasks and follow through. I would like to say something about his social skills, because this is the part of Asperger which is so different from most of us. His neurological differences greatly affect his ability to interact socially with his teachers, counselors and most importantly his peers/fellow students. The fact that he struggles so much in even interacting with kids his own age shows you just how important it is to be able to "relate to others". To have this kind of deficit is the most complex and abstract deficit a teenager/young adult can have because it affects totally how he is able to function in a social environment, the school campus.

Socializing and interacting with another person for most people is like breathing. We do not think about breathing. Likewise, we do not think about socializing. It occurs naturally. We instinctively respond to people's voice and tone, facial expressions, where their eyes look, body positions and even how close the other person is to them when a conversation occurs. We take this information in and then make a response with the right tone, eye contact, body position, appropriate facial expression all within split seconds. Unfortunately, this does not occur for many Asperger children and they must go through training and instruction to overcome this.

The fact that one is NOT able to respond socially in a way that is typical and normal creates a situation in which the Asperger/HFA child must overcome not only academic standards, but incredibly his struggles to interact with other people.

It is FACT, when a child has a stiff facial expression, a monotone voice and has delayed emotional or odd responses that the other kids will think him "odd" and accordingly exclude him for his difference.

So how does an older Asperger/HFA teenager respond if there is no support, minimal support or no program to help him interact with other people in a school environment?

There is a variety of results for all the different Asperger/HFA families, but in my son's case, he struggled immensely. He skipped classes. He hid from teachers and counselors. He could not handle the assignments given to him in a group setting. He would simply not turn in assignments. He would not ask for help. Often, he would stay with an art teacher (she has an Asperger son) who cared greatly for him and try to gather his wits and gather enough focus to try again. Many times he could not muster the energy to try again in a class and would stay with the teacher who cared for him. His last two years of school were the hardest as we struggled to keep him going.

In looking back, it is simple for me to see that without a program to help my son that this was inevitable. There was no program at all for my son and he had to struggle alone in school. I can say this full-well knowing there was no program, because there was no catchy program name like "AIM" or "ASPIRE", no Asperger/Autism room, no social skills and no plan to help him through other than cover the bases for test-taking and TAKS. He did however have the label, the imprint of Autism which is Asperger.

Even though there was no program, my son successfully completed high school.

Based on my experience and from meeting other families in the spectrum, I find that this can often be the case. Without support and an active Autism program, many Asperger child can barely meet the demands placed on him. The social interactive part of the school environment eventually proves to be too difficult, complex and simply overwhelms the Asperger/HFA child.

Unfortunately, there are NOT many public schools that have active programs that really get after the "root" issues of HFA/Asperger - which is to help the child think about others, interact with others and help them through with executive functions and planning of tasks. As a result, some families leave the public school systems because they find that the public school just can't meet their child needs.

I am not here though to disparage the public school system, especially if you consider the fact that my son and our family stayed and struggled through it. We did everything we could to help him through, but I believe something and "much more" is needed to help HFA/Asperger children.

Quickly I will say there is a ton of knowledge on how to address social skills for HFA/Asperger kids. I have two books with me. They are both by Michelle Garcia Winner, a practicing Speech Language Pathologist from California that clearly provide a curriculum and lessons that could be used by a school to help an

Asperger/HFA child when in school. These are incredible books on social skills training.

This brings me to why I am here today. I want to tell you that there are Asperger families that have "given up on public schools", have been denied services and "decided that ARDs" were not going to do enough to help their young child in school. They decided to leave the public school system and either home-school or go to a private school. Yet, and importantly, there are some public schools doing great a job. It is unfortunate, that where a person lives may turn out to be a huge problem, because of the availability of Autism services in our public school system.

In my dealings with the spectrum, I firmly believe the SB 1000 Bill will greatly help Autism Spectrum families. I have read many, many emails and Yahoo Autism group posts where the Autism spectrum family is seeking to find a school that could better address their child's need. The seeking family will eventually find that there is a school with a different, better-staffed program, possibly nearby. They will find the point-of-contact, the type settings, the type of services, and in what ways the school will help their child.

However, some of these programs are not available to an Autism family simply because they live in the wrong place and the wrong ISD.

In closing, I have with me a third book. It is the book "Autism – Heartfelt Thoughts from Fathers". It is a book that shares stories from fathers who have a loved one in the Autism spectrum.

David and I are in the middle of the book

<http://www.autismthoughts.com/fathersbook.htm>

I thank you for this public hearing. I am an avid supporter of Senate Bill 1000, "ASAP" because I personally know many Autism Spectrum families that could benefit from this Bill in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. I also know that it will help other families who are just starting out on the road in dealing with Autism. I thank all of the Senators who have drafted this Bill and the sponsors.

This is a wonderful Bill which gives an Autism Spectrum family an option to go to the best program in a nearby neighborhood.

Sincerely,

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David, Asperger son